Good Arguments
by Bo Seo

DISAGREEMENT

Broadly speaking, people disagreed about three sorts of things – facts, judgements, prescriptions – and each one gave rise to its own type of debate.

Factual disagreements centered on claims about the way things are. They take the form 'X is Y', where both X and Y are empirically observable features of the world.

> Lagos is a megacity.
> The crime rate in Paris was lower in 2014 than in 2016.

Normative disagreements concern our subjective judgments about the world – the way things are or ought to be, in our view. They take the form 'A should be considered B' or 'We have good reason to believe that A is B.'

> Lying is (should be considered) immoral.
> (We have reason to believe that) tomorrow will be better.

Prescriptive disagreements relate to what we should do. These usually take the form 'C should D', where C is the actor and D is an action.

> Our family should get a gym membership.
> The government should not impose limits on freedom of speech.

MERE DIFFERENCE ON DETAILS	MERE DIFFERENCE OF REASONING	MERE DIFFERENCE OF APPROACH
Disagree on fact	Agree on fact	Agree on fact
Agree on judgement	Disagree on judgement	Agree on judgement
Agree on prescription	Agree on prescription	Disagree on prescription
'The school does not have some basic facilities. But we have an obligation to improve	'The school has the basic facilities. We have no obligation to improve it, but	'The school has the basic facilities. We have an obligation to improve it.
it, so we should send our kids there.'	we should send our kids there anyway because it will be good for them.'	But we can find other ways of doing that without sending our children there.'

MERE AGREEMENT ON DETAILS	MERE AGREEMENT ON JUDGEMENT	MERE AGREEMENT ON OUTCOME
Agree on fact	Disagree on fact	Disagree on fact
Disagree on judgement	Agree on judgement	Disagree on judgement
Disagree on prescription	Disagree on prescription	Agree on prescription
'The school has the basic facilities. We have no obligation to improve it, and we shouldn't send our kids there.'	'The school does not have some basic facilities. We have an obligation to improve it, but we still shouldn't send our kids there.'	'The school does not have some basic facilities. We have no obligation to improve it, but we should send our kids there because it will be good for them.'

ARGUMENT

First, to come up with an argument, start with a conclusion – the fact, judgment, or prescription that one wants the listener to accept.

Bob is not a nice person: CONCLUSION

Second, take the conclusion, add the word because, and fill in the sentence.

This is the main claim, or the point that the argument will have to prove.

Bob is not a nice person: CONCLUSION

because he is inconsiderate of other people's feelings: MAIN CLAIM

Third, take the main claim, add the word because, and fill in the sentence. This is the reason – a consideration in favor of a claim.

Bob is inconsiderate: MAIN CLAIM

because he is often cruel to others, including to his friends: REASON

Fourth, support the reason with evidence – a piece of information or fact from the real world.

At dinner last Friday, he made hurtful comments about Sheryl's job: EVIDENCE

Fifth, link the main claim to the conclusion with another reason.

The fact that Bob is inconsiderate means he is not a nice person because, regardless of his intent, he causes people a great deal of pain: LINK

This last step revealed what Bruce described as an argument's 'two burdens of proof' – that is, the two things that an argument has to prove before it can have a chance of convincing a listener. These burdens apply to almost every argument we encounter daily and are known as the 'truth' and 'importance' conditions:

Truth	: The main claim is factually correct or otherwise believable.
Importance	: The main claim supports its conclusion.

For the argument above – Bob is not a nice person because he is inconsiderate of other people's feelings – these burdens are:

Truth	: Bob is, in fact, inconsiderate of other people's feelings.
Importance	: If Bob is inconsiderate, we should conclude he is not nice.

What is the point?
Why is it true?
When has it happened before?
Who cares?

The structure was simple, but it contained the most essential features of a good argument. For example, on the affirmative for the topic 'That we should abolish jury trials', I might have written:

What? We should abolish jury trials because they result in an unacceptable number of wrong verdicts.
Why? Juries do not understand legal evidence. They are unduly swayed by the media and also reflect the inherent biases of their societies.
When? Lawyers in the US attest in overwhelming numbers to the 'CSI effect', a term used to describe the distortionary effect of television shows on juries' understanding of forensic evidence.

Who cares? A wrong verdict is a miscarriage of justice for the victim, the accused, and the society at large. It also reduces confidence in the criminal justice system.

The four Ws also applied to arguments we made in our everyday lives.
Though we could not plan our points in advance, we could easily reach midstream for the other elements. For example, if the eldest daughter in a family of five opposed her parents' plan to adopt a dog, she could strengthen her position with an argument that answered the four Ws:

What? We should not adopt a dog because we will never go for walks.
Why? Everyone is too busy. On Wednesdays, we don't get home until 8:00 pm.
When? The last goldfish we brought home from the store died due to neglect.
Who cares? The dog will be unhappy without regular walks, and members of the family will fight over this added chore.

In her speech, Debra seemed to be guided by an awareness of which arguments had and had not landed with the judges. If Shreya and I had been too abstract, she dug into the details: 'Forget these words like "violence" and "calamity" or, on our side, "interference" or "resistance". This is about spiking trees and blowing up construction sites in the dead of night to prevent further destruction of this planet.'

REBUTTAL

Rebuttal, or the art of taking down an opposing argument, is straightforward in theory. As Bruce had explained to me years earlier, an argument has two burdens of proof: to show that its main point is true and that it supports the conclusion.

CONCLUSION   : We should criminalize marijuana
MAIN CLAIM   : because it is bad for people's health.

Truth: Marijuana is, in fact, bad for people's health.
Importance: If marijuana is bad for people's health, we should criminalize it.

No argument can succeed without meeting both of its burdens. So it follows that one can take down an argument by showing that it is untrue or unimportant or both.

Un-truth   : Marijuana is not, in fact, bad for people's health.
Un-importance   : Even if marijuana is bad for people's health, we should not criminalize it.

This insight forms the basis of all rebuttal, on issues great and small:

Un-truth   : The old car is not, in fact, out of fashion.
Un-importance   : Even if the old car is out of fashion, we should not buy a new car.

There are several ways to show that an argument has failed to meet its burdens. Truth rebuttal says the target argument contains inadequate information. Its content may be factually incorrect ('No, people are not buying fewer hatchbacks these days') or lack evidence ('You haven't given any reasons for me to believe that people's tastes are changing'). There can be conflicting information that makes the point inconclusive ('Yes, that's what Cars Daily says, but Motor Enthusiasts reckons something else').

Importance rebuttal takes two forms. One says the target argument is unimportant – that it does not provide a reason to support its conclusion. An opponent may be making a logical leap or misjudging the relevance of their argument ('Who says we have to drive a fashionable car?'). The second says the target argument is outweighed by other considerations – that it does support its conclusion but that there are good reasons to reject the conclusion nonetheless. There may be better alternatives ('Yes, we should drive a fashionable car, but we could do that by modifying the old one') or competing considerations ('Yes, we should drive a fashionable car, but we should also live within our means').

The argument had two burdens of proof:

Truth   : Personal information, in fact, helps citizens choose good representatives.
Importance   : If personal information helps citizens choose good representatives, then the media should intrude.

This gave me three openings for attack. I could say the argument was untrue, unimportant, or outweighed by other considerations:

Untrue   : No, personal information does not help citizens choose good representatives. The majority of this information is gossip and hearsay.
Unimportant   : The fact that personal information may help citizens choose good representatives does not mean the media should intrude. Installing CCTVs in candidates' homes would also produce revealing information, but we'd never allow that.
Outweighed   : Even if the media has good reason to intrude into politicians' lives, doing so would inflict collateral damage on their families and loved ones.

RHETORIC

WORD		
Rule #1 **No abstract words**	Don't replace a word with the category to which it belongs, or use an abstract word when a more concrete one will do. We may be tempted to use this move to make our arguments seem more widely applicable and important. But the actual effect is to make our point harder to follow.	**Bad:** 'Our educational institutions are failing.' **Better:** 'Our schools and colleges are underfunded.'

SENTENCE		
Rule #2 **No confusing metaphors**	Treat metaphors like an overwhelmingly powerful spice: account for each one that you use, and almost never mix them. Note that some common fragments of language are, in fact, metaphors – 'separate the wheat from the chaff.'	**Bad:** 'Injustice reigns and pervades the air that we breathe.' **Better:** 'Injustice reigns and makes subjects of us all.'
Rule #3 **No excess qualification**	Qualifications, exceptions, and counterarguments can wait until the main point has been established. In a bid to be faultless we fail the more basic task of getting the message out.	**Bad:** 'The right to life, notwithstanding the complications of how we define that term, is one of the more important rights we have.' **Better:** 'The right to life is paramount.'

PARAGRAPH		
Rule #4 **No buried ledes**	Start with the conclusion of your argument, and say the minimum amount required to prove it. This way	**Bad:** 'On one hand, the proposal is cost-effective, but I worry about the PR

	we know where the argument is heading and whether we are on track.	risks… so I would lean against it.' **Better:** 'We should not adopt this proposal. This is how I see the trade-offs….'
Rule #5 **No thoughtless repetition**	Don't repeat the message without considering what the repetition will help you achieve. In general, many versions of the same claim dilute the message and, if the listener is unprepared to hear the point in this form, feel overwhelming. One rule of thumb: when you're 80 percent satisfied with how you have delivered the message, move on.	**Bad:** 'The kids are unhappy about their new school. Their discontent is palpable. The school is not working out for them at all. They say it is horrible.' **Better:** 'The kids are palpably unhappy with their new school. We need to do something.'

PROPORTIONALITY		
Rule #6 **No emoting**	Make sure the tone of your words fits the thing you are trying to describe. Otherwise it becomes emoting – a performance in which emotions no longer correspond to the situation at hand. The most obvious forms are exaggeration and euphemism.	**Bad:** 'This thing is a catastrophe!' **Better:** 'This inconvenienced me.' **Bad:** 'This was a regrettable error.' **Better:** 'Our mistake cost people's jobs.'
Rule #7 **No insinuation**	Don't imply a conclusion that you are unwilling to directly defend. One common technique is dog-whistling, or the use of coded language to hint at a position that one can later deny. Another is the use of a rhetorical question in place of an argument.	**Bad:** 'I want to protect our way of life.' **Better:** 'I believe in reduced migration and a commitment to assimilation.' **Bad:** 'What is the government hiding about the moon landing?' **Better:** 'The moon landing was a hoax.'

PERSONALITY		
Rule #8 **Reveal the journey**	Besides explaining *what* you believe and *why*, tell the story of *how* you came to believe it. Listeners often find the prospect of changing their mind to be terrifying. They want to know where the speaker is coming from, so that they may be able to trust and even identify with the person.	**Bad:** 'Mandatory sentencing is a grave injustice.' **Better:** 'I came to believe that mandatory sentencing is a grave injustice through the experience of...'
Rule #9 **Name the stakeholder**	Benefits and harms are rarely ends unto themselves. They are beneficial and harmful for *someone*. Tell the audience who that person is and why their interests are worthy of consideration.	**Bad:** 'The prohibition of alcohol will lead to the creation of a black market.' **Better:** 'The prohibition of alcohol will incentivise criminals to set up an illegal market that preys on addicts and children.'

PANACHE		
Rule #10 **Find the applause line**	There are no hard-and-fast rules, but applause lines tend to be short, expressive of a complete thought, free of redundancies, original, and idealistic.	**Bad:** 'The good citizen does not make endless demands. He or she seeks to contribute in what ways he or she can.' **Better:** 'Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.'

QUIET How to know when to disagree

Real	There is an actual difference of opinion between the two sides.
Important	The difference of opinion is important enough to justify a disagreement.
Specific	The subject of the disagreement is specific enough to allow the two sides to make some progress toward resolving or ameliorating within the allotted time.
Aligned	The two sides are aligned in their reasons for engaging in the disagreement.

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SELF-DEFENCE How to defeat a bully

What we need to do instead is to prove the falsehood of the liar's remarks. In debate, we use a two-step method called 'plug and replace':
1. Plug the lie into a broader view of the world, then explain what problems arise:
'Let's imagine that immigrants are violent people. How do you explain the fact that they are less likely to be convicted of a violent crime than native-born citizens?'
2. Replace the lie with the truth, then explain why the latter is more likely the reality:
'The truth is that immigrants aren't any more violent than other people. They live in tough, heavily policed neighborhoods and are still less likely to get caught up in crime.'

DODGER	
Pivot Ad hominem Tu quoque	Stay the course
TWISTER	
Straw man Burden push	Correct the record
WRANGLER	
Moving goalposts Dog-whistle	Pin them to a position
LIAR	
Lie Bluster Liar's spread	Plug and replace Refute the representative lie

EDUCATION How to raise citizens

RELATIONSHIPS How to fight and stay together

The background conditions for good disagreement are hard to secure, but especially (and perversely) so in the relationships that matter most:

Unreal: Misunderstandings are rife in personal relationships. It is hard to listen and easier to presume. This is partly due to the certainty that comes with greater knowledge of the other person, but also to the romantic notion that we should understand our intimates implicitly – perhaps better than they understand themselves. The result? We fight over a misunderstanding until we stumble into a genuine disagreement.

Unimportant: Minor disagreements take on an exaggerated importance in intimate relationships. We expect our loved ones to agree with us, even to be like us, and we get upset when those hopes are dashed. We also read into trivial disputes all kinds of signs – about mutual compatibility, relationship strength, and our status in the mind of the other person. So molehills start to look like mountains.

Unspecific: Personal disagreements tend to have few natural limits. We are so entangled with the other person that any single dispute unfolds against the background of a thousand others – say, that other time your partner did a similar thing. As soon as we start expanding the scope of the disagreement, we risk making it irresolvable.

Unaligned: People quarrel with their loved ones for complicated reasons. Some of these are unrelated to the issue at hand. We argue to cause pain, signal our unhappiness, and test whether the other person still cares about us. This makes it harder to ensure that the two sides' motivations are aligned.

In the last five minutes before the start of a debate, do one or more of the following:
Brainstorm: Take out a new piece of paper. Imagine that you are now on the other side of the motion. Brainstorm the four best arguments in support of the position.
Stress-test: Review your arguments from the perspective of an opponent. Think up the strongest possible objections to each claim and write them in the margins.
Loss ballot: Imagine that you have won the debate from the opposing side. Write out the reason why you won, including the mistakes made by the opposition.

TECHNOLOGY How to debate in the future